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Responding to a Chicago Sun-Times investigation, the head of the federal Veterans Affairs Department in Washington says he will come to Chicago and address why Illinois' wounded soldiers receive among the lowest disability pay in the country.

Illinois politicians expressed outrage Friday after reading in the Sun-Times that the VA office in Chicago is one of the stingiest in the country.

"Veterans across Illinois deserve answers to this basic question," said U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.). "If we are prepared to make the speeches and have the parades and build the monuments, are we prepared to stand behind veterans who are wounded serving this country?"

Along with a letter, Durbin phoned VA Secretary Anthony Principi and asked him to come to Chicago and meet with disabled veterans to give an answer.

Wounded warriors

The Chicago office of the federal Veterans Affairs agency consistently awards less disability pay to disabled vets than do VA offices elsewhere. With more wounded soldiers surviving today, the problem is likely to get worse as more return from Iraq, reporters Cheryl L. Reed and Lori Rackl found.

Gov. Blagojevich also sent a terse letter to Principi demanding a plan to address "this intolerable situation."

"The VA is committed to treating the claims of every Chicago veteran fairly and equitably. If that is not happening, it will be addressed," said Principi through a spokeswoman, who said she didn't know when the Chicago visit would take place.

A litany of elected officials -- from federal, state and local levels -- called for a full review of the VA Chicago office and its disability awards to Illinois veterans.

For the last six years, Illinois veterans have received the lowest or near the lowest disability payments in the country.

Last year, wounded Illinois veterans, on average, received \$6,802, while those from New Mexico and Maine received \$10,851 and \$10,842, respectively. Disabled U.S. veterans in Puerto Rico fare the best: They get nearly \$5,000 more per veteran than their Illinois counterparts.

'Numbers were shocking'

"It is a shame that we are treating our veterans so poorly here in Chicago," said state Sen. Miguel del Valle (D-Chicago), who vowed to push a resolution in the coming General Assembly asking for an investigation.

Calling the VA's treatment of Illinois veterans "unacceptable" and "horrific," Ald. James Balcer (11th), a Vietnam veteran, said he would introduce a resolution Wednesday in the Chicago City Council calling for hearings on disability payments.

"God, those numbers were shocking to me," Balcer said. "Supporting the troops means more than just supporting them while they are in combat. The VA has to step up to the plate and do more."

Along with Durbin, U.S. Rep. Lane Evans of Rock Island, the ranking Democrat on the House Veterans Affairs Committee, is drafting a letter to Principi and asking every Illinois congressman to sign it. He was joined by Chicago Democratic U.S. Rep. Luis Gutierrez, also a member of the Veterans Affairs Committee.

Treat them as heroes

"When these men and women come home, they should not have to fight a government agency for disability benefits as hard as they had to fight our enemies abroad," Gutierrez said. "They should be treated as heroes and as patriots."

In his letter to Principi, Blagojevich called the Chicago office "hostile" and criticized Chicago VA Director Michael Olson as giving "little cooperation" to the governor's veterans affairs staff.

Blagojevich wrote that his director of veterans affairs had repeatedly reached out to the VA regional office in Chicago to try to improve the disability claims process.

"We have seen minimal improvement," the governor wrote. "Our veterans, even those most severely disabled, are all too often denied unnecessarily, and face excessive delays."

Olson said he had never dealt with the governor's office of veterans affairs. "I don't know what he is referring to," Olson said.

Friday's outcry wasn't limited to Democrats. U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), a Navy reservist, said he would be willing to sign Evans' letter calling for an investigation.

"If you are wounded in the war on terror and come back to Illinois, you will be at a disadvantage, and that is wrong," Kirk said. "We are making new veterans in the war in Iraq. We cannot shortchange them."